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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationship between reading and the writings of gifted secondary school writers, especially their developmental reading interests, leisure reading selections, and the influence of others on their literary choices. Subjects, 79 students from rural and urban Arkansas schools were participating in a gifted writers' conference for which they had been selected by their teachers. Representing schools with differing patterns of grade level arrangement, they all came from grades 7-12. Subjects were surveyed as to the age they began reading, favorite books, books read during the last 12 months, number of books read, and how they learned about the books they wanted to read. Teachers were also surveyed about how they recommended books to students and asked to estimate how many books the students read. Survey responses indicated that students identified as gifted writers had a wide range of reading interests and that family and friends most frequently influenced their reading choices. Many students reported reading before school entrance. Dr. Seuss books were early reading choices; Newbery Medal books were cited as favorites during intermediate grades. By the time of secondary education, however, they read a wide range of genres, citing Stephen King as their favorite author, and Shel Silverstein and Edgar Allan Poe as favorite poets. Many books read would be considered adult selections, with horror fiction a popular choice. Advice of teachers and librarians was usually not sought, raising questions about guidance given to secondary students regarding contemporary literature. (NKA)

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OF GIFTED SECONDARY SCHOOL WRITERS

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Reading Interests of Gifted Secondary School Writers

With the advent of whole language approaches to reading and the integration of subject areas, interest has grown in the relationship between reading and writing. Research studies have shown that what one reads influences one's writing style and the content of one's writing (Echkoff, 1983; Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987; Mill, 1974). In reviewing the literature of giftedness, however, information about the relationship between giftedness in writing and the development of reading and literary choices is lacking. A study by Hawkins (1983) of the reading interests of gifted children revealed little difference between gifted children's interests and those of children in general.

The intent of this study was to investigate the relationship between reading and the writings of gifted secondary writers. Specifically, the purpose was to learn about the developmental reading interests, leisure reading selections, and the influence of others on literary choices of secondary students identified as gifted writers by their teachers.

Setting

Since 1990 the Northwest Arkansas Education Service Cooperative in Springdale, Arkansas, has been sponsoring an annual daylong Writers' Conference for secondary school students (grades 7-12). The conference is designed to bring together selected secondary students with published writers and illustrators. Participation in the conference is limited to three student representatives and one sponsoring teacher from each secondary building in the 18 school districts serviced by the Cooperative. Students are selected by teachers at their respective buildings. Selection criteria often include evaluation of written work to a committee of teachers; teacher recommendations based on quality of writing over a period of time; student interest. Beginning with the first conference in 1990, student input and response to the event has been used to shape the direction of successive mini-session offerings.

The March 1993 Writers' Conference featured author M. E. Kerr in a morning general session. In the afternoon students attended a selected mini-session (Novel Writing, Song Writing, TV/News Writing, Story-telling, Poetry, and Computer Animation) or represented their school district in a special mini-session "F. S.O.- For Students Only." F.S.O. was a critiquing session with the guest author M. E. Kerr. Between the morning general session and the afternoon mini-sessions, information about the reading/writing connection was collected by self-report from students and teacher sponsors.

Subjects

Students in the survey came from rural and urban Arkansas schools ranging in size from approximately 200 to 1600 students with a total secondary school enrollment of 16,772 students in the 18 member school districts. They represented schools with differing patterns of grade level arrangements: K-12, 7-12, 6-8, and 9-12. Criteria for student participation in the Writers' Conference included evidence of creative writing ability, teacher recommendation, and student interest. A total of 79 students took part in the survey: 10 seventh grade students, 20 eighth, 17

ninth, 4 tenth, 15 eleventh, and 13 twelfth grade students. The distribution by gender was about equal. In addition, 22 teachers who accompanied the students were surveyed. All came from the same school setting as the students they accompanied and were primarily secondary English teachers.

Data and Results

Early reading. To learn about their early reading development and interests, students were asked if they read before entering school. Of the 79 respondents, 54 reported reading before starting school, 23 indicated they did not read before school enrollment and 2 did not respond.

When students were asked to name their favorite book(s) as a very young child(before the age of 7), students listed 105 favorite books. Dr. Seuss and various Seuss titles were listed a total of 32 times, followed in frequency by Little Golden Books (10 times). Among the early childhood selections were the following classics: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (Lewis, 1950); Winnie the Pooh (Milne, 1926); The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (Twain, 1936); and the Wizard of Oz collection; Charlotte's Web (White, 1952); and Good Night Moon (Brown, 1947). The Ramona Quimby/Beverly Cleary books were cited several times. Of the Caldecott Medal and Newbery Honor and Award Books, only Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1963) and Charlotte's Web were mentioned.

Intermediate grade reading. Students were asked to list titles and authors of their favorite books while in grades 4-6. A total of 156 books or series were reported. Newbery Medal Honor and Award Books were mentioned 25 times, including Charlotte's Web, and the Little House Books. These were followed in frequency by the Nancy Drew series, the Ramona books, then Hardy Boys series, The Hobbit (Tolkien, 1938), the Sweet Valley High series, Lord of the Rings (Tolkien, 1974), Superfudge (Blume, 1980) and Charlie May Simon Book Award Winners or authors. (The Charlie May Simon Book Award is given annually by the Arkansas Elementary School Council to a book selected by Arkansas children in grades 4-6). In addition, 13 books considered classics were listed 15 times. Classics mentioned included works of Shakespeare (3), The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (2), The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (2), and The Chronicles of Narnia (2).

Last twelve months' reading. Students were asked to list the books that they read during the last 12 months. Of the 337 books listed, the most frequent choices were Dracula (Stroker, 1975), The Bible, To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1960), and Talisman (King, 1984). Mentioned on this list were one Newbery title, Incident at Hawks Hill (Eckert, 1971), and three titles from the American Library Association's (ALA) Best Books for Young Adults. No titles from the International Reading Association's (IRA) Young Adults' Choices List were mentioned.

Number of books read. Students were asked to indicate the number of books they had read during the last twelve months that were not school assignments. The number of books read ranged from two to 300; the range was similar across grade levels. Thirty-five students stated they had read 10 or fewer books during the previous year, 16 students read 11 to 25 books, 23 students read in

excess of 25 books, and five students did not respond to the question.

Favorite books, author, poet. Students were asked to list their favorite book, author, and poet. Eighty responses were given by 71 students relevant to a favorite book. Multiple responses were given for Gone with the Wind (Mitchell, 1936), It (King, 1986), Lord of the Rings (Tolkien, 1974), Secret Garden (Burnett, 1949), and To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1960). Two Newbery books were included in the selections, Hero and the Crown (McKinley, 1984) and Number the Stars (Lowry, 1989), but no IRA Young Adult Choices or ALA Best Books for Young Adults were listed.

By far the favorite author selected was Stephen King (16 responses) followed by Christopher Pike (4) , Anne Rice (4), and Danielle Steele (3) . Shel Silverstein (10) and Edgar Allen Poe (10) were identified as the favorite poets followed by Robert Frost (5) , Emily Dickinson (4), and Maya Angelou (4).

Book selection and influences. Two other areas of interest relevant to gifted writers were addressed: how they learned of books that they decided to read, and what influence the books and authors read had on their writing. The most frequently stated method of acquiring information about potential reading material (35 responses) was through word of mouth from relatives and friends. Nine students of the 79 mentioned teachers as an information source for book selection. The library and book stores were each mentioned four times.

Students were asked how the books they read influenced their writing. They responded that their reading did effect their writing by providing styles to imitate(11 responses); giving them ideas(7); and a sense of the writing process(5).

Mini-sessions. When the students responses to questions were separated by the writing mini-sessions they chose to attend, the following was revealed. The most frequently selected sessions were Poetry (21), Novel Writing (17), and TV/News Writing (11). When books read in the last 12 months were sorted by writing sessions attended, it was found that those students choosing the Poetry session listed 104 book titles, students in Novel Writing listed 70, and those in TV/News Writing listed 43. On the average, those in the Novel Writing group cited the most books read per student (6.6) while TV/News Writing (3.9), and the Story-telling group reported reading the least (3.2).

Teacher survey. When teachers were asked to estimate how many books their students read per year aside from school assignments, they stated ranges from "no idea" to "countless," although several said "five or fewer."

Half of the teachers stated that they gave their students a recommended reading list. Their suggestions ranged from listing book titles, genres of literature, books on award winning lists, to identifying authors.

When the teachers were asked where they got the reading suggestion that they recommended to students,their responses included librarians, college preparatory lists, personal experience, other English teachers, the Newbery and classic lists, as well as workshops and other teachers.

Summary and Discussion

Overall, the survey showed that students identified as gifted secondary writers had a wide range of reading interests and that family and friends most frequently influenced their reading choices. Many of the students reported that they had begun reading before school entrance. Works of Dr. Seuss were early reading choices. Newbery Medal honor and award books were cited a number of times as favorite titles in the intermediate elementary school years.

By the time these students reached secondary school, their reading choices had little relationship to books on the International Reading Association or American Library Association recommended lists for young adults. These students read a wide range of genres and were aware of the reading/writing connection. The number of books read varied greatly. Stephen King was their most frequently read author. Poetry was a strong area of interest with Shel Silverstein and Edgar Allen Poe cited as their favorite poets.

Many of the titles read by the gifted secondary writers are viewed as adult readings. Contemporary authors and books of thriller or horror variety were often selected by the students surveyed.

Teacher and librarian guidance of book selection for the students was limited. None of the teachers queried mentioned recommend the IRA or ALA young adult reading lists to their students. This may be a reflection of secondary teacher training programs which focus on classic literary works and fail to provide adequate preparation in contemporary young adult/adult literature.

From the information gathered, it appears that gifted secondary writers are getting little assistance in leisure reading selection. They appear to sample widely the genres of literature and to read adult best sellers. Their reading choices at the secondary school level have little relationship to their formal school English programs with the exception of the area of poetry. This study raises questions of the guidance given to secondary students regarding contemporary literature. Are teacher training programs for secondary English teachers and for librarians including study of contemporary young adult literary works? Are English teachers taking advantage of the reading/writing connection to provide a framework for the writing process which is supported by student leisure reading? Would more guidance in leisure reading selection further improve the writing skills of gifted students?

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